

News from U.S. Rep. John Spratt (D-SC)

Assistant to the Democratic Leader

Ranking Member, Committee on the Budget

US House of Representatives – Washington, DC

www.house.gov/spratt | www.house.gov/budget_democrats

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Contact: Chuck Fant, 202-225-5501

Democrats Voice Concern to Bush Over U.S.-Russia Agreements

WASHINGTON – In a letter to President Bush, six House Democrats today expressed concern that the U.S. may not renew two key U.S.-Russian nonproliferation agreements. The letter, which appears below, was signed by Reps. Ike Skelton, John Spratt, Adam Schiff, Ellen Tauscher, Chet Edwards, and Brad Sherman.

July 22, 2003

The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to you to express our deep concern that the United States is contemplating the possible non-renewal of two key U.S.-Russian nonproliferation agreements that provide the legal basis for important cooperative threat reduction efforts with Russia. We believe that allowing these agreements to lapse or expire, which would delay and possibly terminate important activities, would be a dangerous and unnecessary development, and contrary to the abiding concerns that you have expressed regarding the need to eliminate weapons of mass destruction and related proliferation risks around the world.

We understand that the administration may shortly notify the Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy of its intention to end the September 22, 1998 Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Russian Federation on the Nuclear Cities Initiative. This agreement, which has a five year duration, directs implementation of the Department of Energy's Nuclear Cities Initiative - the U.S. government's flagship program dedicated to reducing the size of the Russian nuclear weapons complex and transitioning its excess scientists and workers into peaceful alternative careers. In the near future there are a number of warhead production and fissile material production facilities that are scheduled for reduction or closure under the

Russian government's own plans. This will result in thousands of additional excess workers and scientists who have sensitive knowledge in plutonium reactor operations, detailed weapons designs, and fissile material processes - information that would be of significant interest to terrorists and other states with nuclear ambitions.

In addition, we understand that the administration may be prepared to allow the July 24, 1998 Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Russian Federation on the Scientific and Technical Cooperation in the Management of Plutonium that has been Withdrawn from Nuclear Military Programs to lapse when it expires this Thursday. This agreement governs key aspects of the effort to dispose of 34 metric tons of Russian weapons-grade plutonium.

We understand that the Russian government was prepared to renew both of these agreements for another five years, but that the United States has demanded that their liability provisions be modified to include stronger language that Russia has found difficult to accept at this time. This impasse has placed prospects for future U.S.-Russian nonproliferation cooperation at great risk.

Beyond the national security and nonproliferation concerns of allowing the plutonium disposition program in Russia to stall or terminate, there might also be significant negative domestic impacts on the activities associated with the plutonium disposition activities in the U.S. The U.S. plutonium disposition effort is a multi-billion dollar program that is designed to operate in tandem with the Russian plutonium disposal activities, and support for the effort could falter if the Russian program stalls.

In short, we believe there will be negative and perhaps unanticipated consequences resulting from the termination and/or expiration of these agreements, and we urge your administration not to adopt a position so rigid as to produce such a result. A more flexible approach - including extending these agreements for at least one year - would allow for the robust continuation of both programs, as well as allowing sufficient time for both parties to resolve the outstanding liability issues. The current situation raises doubts about the administration's commitment to rapidly and effectively addressing the well-known nuclear security and proliferation concerns with Russia.

As you have made clear in your National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction, "Maintaining an extensive and efficient set of nonproliferation and threat reduction assistance programs to Russia and other former Soviet states is a high priority." We share this commitment to sustaining an effective threat reduction partnership with Russia, one that works to reduce proliferation risks emanating from that country's vast stockpile of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, materials, and related expertise. Few objectives are as

central to U.S. national security as eliminating these threats as rapidly as possible.

Thank you for your consideration, and we look forward to your reply.

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